

Author Brian Lies

By MARTHA HIMES

One day when Brian Lies was in fifth grade, children's book author Harry Devlin, the author of *Cranberry Christmas* and *How Fletcher Was Hatched*, spoke at his Princeton, New Jersey, school assembly. The schoolchildren made books of their own, and Lies said to himself, "That has got to be the coolest job in the world."

Now Lies is the one speaking to classrooms, inspiring

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Lies is hard at work on his next book, *Bats at the Beach*, due next spring, his third book for children.

the next generation of children's book authors. He still has the book he made that fateful day in fifth grade, entitled *The Dinosaur*. (His artistic skills have improved dramatically since then.)

Lies (pronounced Lees) both writes and illustrates books. His newest book, *Finklehopper Frog Cheers*, written by Irene Livingston, has just come out. He'll be celebrating with a reading, book signing and gallery exhibition on May 14 at the Ellison Center for the Arts.

Finklehopper Frog Cheers is Lies's second Finklehopper Frog book. He has illustrated

about 30 books during his career, and has both written and illustrated two, with a third on the way.

Despite his eye-opening experience in fifth grade, Lies didn't believe he was talented enough to grow up to be a children's book author. Instead, he studied at Brown University to become a clinical psychologist.

As a hobby he drew political cartoons for the university newspaper and made and sold stained glass lamps in the summer.

"I really loved it, and had this sudden flicker; I thought after two years of doing it, 'golly, maybe I can actually

do something that is art as a grownup.' It seemed to me that political cartooning was a great opportunity to combine the thinking part of me with the drawing part. So that became my focus toward the end of my time in college," he said.

The feedback he had received on his cartoons was that his ideas were great but his drawings needed improvement. So following his graduation in 1985, he enrolled in Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where he studied for two and a half years.

In 1987, Lies called famous editorial cartoonist Jeff Danziger out of the blue to ask for advice. Danziger suggested he submit some drawings to the *Christian Science Monitor*. His cartoons were accepted and soon, Lies was making a living from his former hobby, with artwork in the *Boston Globe* and Harvard's and MIT's alumni magazines.



Brian Lies' artwork can be seen in the new release, *Finklehopper Frog Cheers*.

Lies drew for editorial pages until 2001. "The terrorist attacks of 9/11 put a final end to things that I was doing. The economy tanked, art budgets fell out at magazines and newspapers....I think I was fortunate to be well along in children's books before 9/11 happened."

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By 2001, Lies had 12 years' experience painting for children's books. He got his start through a fortunate encounter: while in line at a Cambridge bookstore, he met the art director at Houghton Mifflin. She was impressed by his skills and immediately signed him up to illustrate his first book, *Flatfoot Fox and*

the Case of the Missing Eye, in 1989.

And what, you ask, do children's art and political art have in common? What did that art director see in his work that impressed her? "I had endless animals," Lies explained. "Eagles, donkeys, elephants; it

was clear that I could do animals at that point."

Children's books are so much about animals that Lies now keeps, in a custom-built bookshelf in his office, a complete set of National Geographic magazines. They are, he said, superb animal drawing reference tomes.

Lies' work extends beyond merely painting animals, though. He also designs the layout of the text on the pages and incorporates subplots into his paintings. He determines where to place the page breaks to build suspense and surprise.

"I am hired for the detail that I put in the pictures and the different kind of subtext or mood that I can bring to the story," he said.

He is hired not by the author but by the author's editor. "Editors pair the author and the illustrator up. Everyone thinks if you're an author, you have to find an illustrator. If an author gets an illustrator before they approach a publisher, they're almost guaranteeing they won't get published," Lies said.

While he loves illustrating other writers' books, Lies enjoys working on his own books a bit more. The first

books he both wrote and illustrated, *Hamlet and the Enormous Chinese Dragon Kite* and *Hamlet and the Magnificent Sandcastle*, were published in 1994 and 2001, respectively. A new edition of *Kite* was released in 2003.

The walls of his office are currently covered with paintings of moonlit bats over the ocean for the book he is now writing, *Bats at the Beach*, which he expects to be published next spring.

Lies says the hardest part of his job is continuity, "getting things to look the same from page to page to page over 32 pages of a book. Getting a character to look the same on every single page is really difficult."

In addition to his book art, he paints covers for children's magazines such as *Cricket*, *Ladybug* and *Babybug*. He has won over a dozen awards for his fine art, editorial and children's paintings throughout his career.

Lies, 42, lives in west Duxbury with his wife Laurel, their almost ten-year-old daughter Maddy, and two cats. In his spare time, when he's not bicycling, gardening or woodworking in their basement, he has been trying to get back to fine art painting for himself, mostly in oil paints.

He sees his job as similar to parenting, in a way. "In telling stories, in some ways what you're doing is trying to make sense of the world for kids and to explain it in a way where they can turn the issues over in their heads a little bit and see how they feel about it. That's what you're trying to do as a parent, too."